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ABSTRACT

Arranged into four parts, the paper offers practical and motivating techniques for using the dime novel in high school classrooms, particularly in the study of women's history. The first part of the paper describes the historical background of the dime novel that was originally intended to entertain the reading public with fast-paced action, high adventure, and ethically uplifting stories. The second part of the paper discusses the use of the dime novel in the classroom and lists 63 themes related to women's involvement in the years 1845-1910 that can be used as a catalyst for discussion. Part 3 presents procedures for using the dime novel in the classroom, including introducing the history of the dime novel and providing specific guidelines for completing the assignment; holding student conferences to assess progress; and conducting and concluding follow-up activities. The last part of the document includes a student handout for writing a dime novel which directs students in the effective use of characterization and plot outline as well as a graphic display and instructions for the completion of an illustrated title page. (LH)

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"THE DOWN-TRODDEN SLAVES OF THE NEEDLE,"

OR,

THE STUDY OF AMERICAN WOMEN, 1840-1910, THROUGH THE WRITING OF A DIME NOVEL

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There is a need to create an awareness of women within the conventional historical framework in the American history classroom. Anne Chapman (1978) argues, "Women are half, or more than half, of the human race. Their experiences and concerns could just as legitimately be central to historical thinking as men's. A fundamental rethinking of historical periodization, subject matter, and canons of significance is called for by feminist history; nothing less than a rewriting of history from the ground up, from an entirely different, a women's, point of view."

That is fine. But, history is history to high school students. And that usually means the course, no matter the topic, is "totally boring" and "totally useless." Therefore, history teaching, to be effective, must capture some of the human drama, the emotions, and feelings which were involved in its making. In fact, one educator believes that a history teacher has two distinct responsibilities toward students. The first responsibility is "to dramatize or vivify particular experiences and engage the imagination, thereby stimulating an awareness of and interest in the unfolding of the human pilgrimage through the past to the present." The second responsibility is "to expand our rather narrow perspectives on the past by transcending our limited selves to include the viewpoints of historical personages who have been actors in the human drama" (Bareli, 1980).

What is needed are fresh approaches to create and motivate that awareness of and interest in studying history, in general, and women's history, in particular. One possible approach is the student dime novel which represents an effective way of making his-

tory live in the minds of students. It enables them to dramatize selected historical concepts and themes and to gain a much needed perspective of the human drama that characterizes history. This paper describes (1) the historical background of the dime novel; (2) the use of the dime novel as a project in studying the historical experience of women between 1840 and 1910; and (3) the procedure in using the dime novel in class.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The dime novel was a form of American subliterature that gained popularity from 1845 to 1910 (Chilcoat, 1981; 1983; Chilcoat & Gasperak, 1983). Dime novels (a misnomer, as most cost only a nickel at the time) were written to entertain the reading proletarian public with fast-paced action, high adventure, and ethically uplifting stories that emphasized the triumph of good over evil. Historically, topics of the dime novel covered events from the pioneering of the West in the nineteenth century to the urbanization of the cities at the turn of the twentieth century. Although making no pretensions to be a historical novel, many of the early stories dealt with real people and actual events in order to sell their product to the public. These early dime novels, patriotic and nationalistic in character, gave a picturesque view of the hardships and struggles of early western life. The story line followed a simple formula: frontier setting, moral hero, rugged individualism, crafty villain, helpless heroine, bold-spirited struggle, and a happy ending.

The dime novel continued to be popular during the late nine-

teenth century as American society experienced tremendous industrial and urban growth. W. H. Bishop, writing for the Atlantic Monthly in 1879, and discussing the social impact of the dime novel, wrote: "It is an enormous field of mental activity, the greatest literary movement, in bulk, of the age and worthy of very serious consideration for itself. Disdained as it may be by the highly cultivated for its character, the phenomenon cannot be overlooked."

The basic theme of the dime novel (keeping with its original simple formula) responded to this growth by underlining fincancial achievement and social acceptability in the big city. The three most popular stories that followed this theme were: (1) the city detective, who was able to thwart crime at every turn; (2) the poor boy or girl, who worked hard, practiced clean living and thrift, and with a little luck and a helping hand, was able to achieve monetary success; and (3) the adventurer, who with an unlimited source of money, was able to participate in exciting and hair-raising undertakings.

On occassion, the dime novel constituted a significant social statement regarding various moral issues that effected American society. The dime novel, Maum Guinea And Her Plantation "Children," or, Holiday Week On A Louisiana Estate, was a slave romance that attacked the morality of slavery and the double standards of slave owners (Simmons, 1976). Horatio Alger, Jr.'s rags-to-riches dime novels portrayed the lives of young men and women living in the dirty streets and crowded tenements of the East side of New York. The message of these stories were, if the potentially delinquent adolescents were to be rehabilitated, a helping hand, either from

individuals or society, was needed (Bowerman, 1979).

With the coming of World War I, the rise of postal rates, and the advent of the magazine boom in the 1920's, the popularity of the dime novel finally faded out.

THE USE OF THE DIME NOVEL IN THE CLASSROOM

The dime novel is a useful technique to unfold the emotional drama of sixty years of some of America's most exciting and colorful history. It captures the emotional climate by taking facts and testimonies and molding them, in narrative form, into meaningful connections, relations, and associations, that in turn motivate student interest and learning.

The following list is designed to illustrate an American historical approach directed toward the examination of a set of concepts and themes about the involvement of women in the years of 1845 to 1910. This list is by no means exhaustive.

political status	intellectual leadership	social class
social conscience	economic exploitation	role modification
political justice	amendment process	social justice
patriarchy	family structure	abolitionists
feminists	social values	stereotypes
social change	ethnic groups	immigration
urbanization	Victorian idealization	discrimination
slavery	labor movement	dignity
rights	low wages	sweatshops
fashion	cultural contributions	manners
motherhood	bloomer movement	Gibson girl
child-rearing	marrage system	sisterhood
womenhood	child labor	tenements
poverty	slums	temperence

social protest	emancipation	legal equality
sex roles	social reform	mill girls
justice	industrialization	working class
strikes	underground railroad	domestic labor
urban poor	corruption	vice
suffrage	anarchism	socialism
antisuffrage	garment workers	trade unions

PROCEDURE

The procedure is divided into an introduction to the assignment, student conferences, and the follow-up activity. The introduction includes a brief history of the dime novel and the nature of the assignment. A discussion revolves around the desired concepts or themes that the teacher wants to emphasize. The students receive a detailed description of the guidelines for writing a dime novel (See Student Handout). The teacher reviews the handout and instructs the students on how to develop and write the assignment, assigns the page amount (between ten and twenty pages), and gives the alloted time in which to complete the project. The project could be due within a given classroom time limit or over several weeks time.

The student conference is designed to reveal problems that the student migh be having, to give further guidelines and clarification in writing, and to ease student frustration. The conferences are held both during class and after school (depending on the given amount of time for the assignment), lasting between ten to fifteen minutes. This usually results in a well written document. The student brings to this conference a rough outline

(includes the plot, the setting, and the cast of characters), three to four sample pages of writing, and a rough drawing for the title page. These items provide the teacher with the opportunity to check on the student's understanding of the assignment and any procedural and substantive problems. If desired the teacher may want to call for a complete rough draft sometime before the assignment is due.

The two major problems that usually occur are the unwillingness to draw the front-page visual and the indability to write in third person narrative. To handle the first problem, the teacher indicates that the drawing is worth a substantial amount of the overall grade. Many students will respond by drawing the visual scene. The other problem is more of a directional and procedural item. Some students think that they are writing a diary and will write in a journalistic or autobiographical narrative. A reminder and some examples of third person narrative are all that are necessary to put the students back on the right track.

The follow-up activity is used to evaluate the learning, the application, and transfer of the concept or theme. The activity gives the students the opportunity to dramatize the past and allow their characters, through a literary medium, to provide them with viewpoints that transcend the past to the present. The activity is in the form of a large group discussion where in students use their dime novels as a basis for the discussion. A general discussion begins with students giving a brief synopsis of their dime novels. Next, the discussion focuses on the conclusions that can be drawn from the dime novel about the concept or theme under con-

sideration. Students read passages from regular history assignments to support their positions and conclusions. At this time, depending on the controversial nature of the concept or theme, the teacher may want to challenge the conclusions by providing additional facts that tend to reject the coclusions. The teacher may ask students to do additional inquiry into the concept or theme so that they may develop a more rational viewpoint of the issue.

The final phase of the activity revolves around a discussion of how students can apply their conclusions about the various concepts and themes to modern society and how they are related to the students and their everyday experiences. In this final phase, learners are able to see, perhaps for the first time, how American history relates to their lives.

CONCLUSION

The dime novel is a literature medium that captures the emotional drama of various historical topics as well as the multitude of concepts and themes that are still applicable in contemporary society. The dime novel stimulates student curiosity about American history, in general, and women's history, in particular. It provides a creative outlet to orchestrate dead facts into meaningful associations and relationships. Of course, the dime novel is not a panacea for solving all that might ail the study of women's history or American history, as a whole, but it certainly can make both topics become live, interesting, and meaningful subjects to all students.

STUDENT HANDOUT FOR WRITING A DIME NOVEL

There are three basic parts to the writing of the dime novel: (1) the characterization, (2) the plot outline, and (3) the title cover. The first two parts deal with the writing of the dime novel. The third part emphasizes the needed visual lure for selling the document to the reading public (in this case the teacher).

CHARACTERIZATION

Regardless of the historical theme, development of the characters is the same. Stereotyped, they are of two basic personalities, the hero/heroine and the villain/siren. The qualities of the hero and the heroine read like a Sunday school lesson. They are self-made, well educated, clean living, adventurous, brave, courageous, gentle, modest, unassuming, brilliant, prodigious with any type of machine or weapon, wealthy, or working towards that end, and exceedingly attractive to the opposite sex. Love is purely romantic, a matter of blushing cheeks and palpitating hearts. They always thwart the evil intentions of the villain/siren.

The villain and the siren are lusty cads and uncouth ruffians filled with fiendish and crafty imaginations to thwart the hero and to defraud the heroine through the use of dirty tricks. They exploit the common man, make a mockery of the democratic process, and manipulate the law for personal gain. He or she is usually a victim of social injustice, mental disturbance, or some confused motive. The dastardly villain and unscrupulous siren are felons of every type: spies, con men, arsonists, swindlers, renegades, misers, bushwackers,

business competitors, crooked government agents, old line aristocrats, bullies, kidnappers, bank robbers, and crafty plutocrats (bankers, land speculators, capitalists, politicans, lawyers, sheriffs).

In addition to the hero/heroine and the villain/siren, other characters can be added to carry out the story. These might be friends or "chums" of the hero/heroine, "cronies" of the villain/siren (they never have friends), or mere bystanders that aid in the development, progression, and flow of the story.

PLOT

The plot consists of a simple story line or a sequential chain of events, emphasis on the local setting, and plenty of action and dialogue. The story line involves the action taken between the hero/heroine and the villain/siren on a situation that the hero/heroine wants to make right and the villain/siren wants to make wrong (or better yet, to attain his/her own ends). The purpose of the story ought to be introduced at the earliest possible moment, bringing together the principal characters to engage the interest of the reader. A situation is created which calls upon the hero/heroine to accomplish some feat or to choose some course of action. The situation should bring out the conflict and/or the difficulty to be overcome.

After presenting the purpose the dime novel should present a series of situations which involve a conflict between the protagonists and the antagonists and the resolution of the conflict. The ending of the story should bring the series of situations to a climatic end. The reader should have a sense of satisfaction in

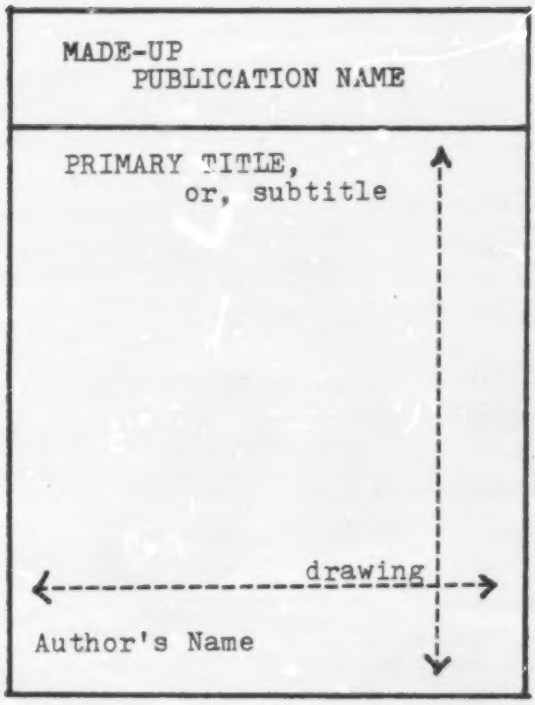
regard to the happy outcome of the story.

Emphasis on local setting provides the necessary realism to establish the plausibility of the story. The dime novel is written in third person narrative with plenty of action and dialogue. For example, a horse never walks or trots in a dime novel, it always gallops. The dialogue is very descriptive so as to provide vivid pictures in the mind of the reader. Add to all of this the historical background and specific situation desired, and you are ready to write a dime novel.

TITLE PAGE

The title page is used to arouse the reader's interest. It also provides a visual opportunity to describe what actions are written in the dime novel. The title is written in two parts: a primary title written in large, bold type followed by a secondary title, known as a subtitle, beginning with thw word "or" written in small type somewhere below the primary title, e.a., Samuel Saves The Day, or, The Peril Of Peter Pringle; Eric The Endearing, or, Dastardly Dirk's Downfall; Joshua Goodwin And The Greedy Landowner, or, The Return Visit To Spencer County.

The drawing encompasses most of the title page. It portrays an exciting, action scene found in the dime novel. The front cover should follow this example:


MADE-UP
PUBLICATION NAME
PRIMARY TITLE,
or, subtitle
drawing
Author's Name

NOTES

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